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Ewen A. Cameron

‘A far cry to London’¹: Joseph Chamberlain in Inverness, September 1885.

A meeting in Inverness addressed by Joseph Chamberlain was described in one of the local newspapers as deserving of the epithet ‘great’ as it ‘was undoubtedly one of the largest gatherings which has ever assembled to hear a political address at any place north of Aberdeen’.² Another, more radical, newspaper made essentially the same point, looking forward to Chamberlain’s visit as ‘the most important political event that ever took place in the Highland capital’.³ It was even the subject of a poem from the eccentric classicist and romantic advocate of the crofters’ cause, John Stuart Blackie, which included the lines :

There now, at last, a MAN! I’ve waited long,
With deaf ear turned to Whig and Tory babble
If God belike might send a champion strong
With potent word to lay the dinsome squabble,
As Moses cleaved the sea.⁴

While Blackie’s poetry may not scan particularly well there is a serious and interesting political point in his text: the idea of Chamberlain as a radical champion capable of cutting through the cant of more moderate politicians, even the Whigs in his own party, to offer attractive solutions to pressing contemporary questions, such as the land question. The theme of Chamberlain’s position in an increasingly divided Liberal party will be one of the main themes of this article and the context and content of the speech, as well as reactions to it, will be analysed for evidence of such tensions.

The audience of 4,500 was accommodated in a specially constructed pavilion in Bell’s Park in the centre of the town. This wooden structure, measuring 154 feet by 82 feet and capable holding 5000 people, had been hastily built in less than a week by local carpenters and was, ‘with some little regret’, demolished after the event. On the night of the meeting it was decorated with flags and

¹ *The Radical Platform: Speeches by the Right Hon. J. Chamberlain, MP, Hull, Warrington, Glasgow, Inverness, Autumn 1885* (Edinburgh 1885) 44.

² *Inverness Courier*, 19 Sep. 1885.

³ *Scottish Highlander*, 11 Sep. 1885.

⁴ The poem, entitled ‘To the Right Hon. Joseph Chamberlain MP’ was first published in the *Pall Mall Gazette*, 22 Sep. 1885 and reprinted in the *Scottish Highlander*, 25 Sep. 1885.

greenery, 'brilliantly lit' by gas burners, and the ceiling draped with calico to improve the acoustics.⁵ The meeting occurred at an exceptionally busy time in the life of the town, coinciding with the Northern Meeting, an annual event of athletic contests and piping competitions. The fact that this event brought people from far afield may have swelled Chamberlain's audience, but it did not stop 'A victim to late hours' from writing to the *Courier* to complain that the early hour of the meeting would prevent 'shopmen' from attending.⁶

This event was significant in the local history of Inverness not only for its elaborate temporary architecture, however, but also for what it can tell us about local and national politics. It came at a delicate moment in the history of the Liberal party and might be seen as part of a campaign by the speaker to assert his right to the leadership in the event, quite widely expected, of the retirement of the septuagenarian William Gladstone. Chamberlain recognised that he had to tread carefully; as he noted in a letter to Jesse Collings, his close political associate in Birmingham:

The words I used at Inverness were used advisedly. I do not think it worthwhile to accentuate the differences between us and Mr Gladstone. In the first place he is squeezable and will probably give way to our views. In the second place his reign cannot possibly be a long one and it is undesirable to have even the remains of his tremendous influence cast against us.⁷

The visit to Inverness was part of a concerted programme of speaking by Chamberlain in the autumn of 1885. He had arrived in Inverness from Glasgow where he had delivered a speech which concentrated on the issue of disestablishment (although with insufficient vigour for the most radical proponents of that doctrine⁸), and his passage through towns such as Aberfoyle and Callender had produced scenes of local excitement with Liberal Associations delivering laudatory addresses and Chamberlain celebrating the strength of Scottish Liberalism. The local newspapers also noted that the pavilion had space specially set aside for the press and the way the meeting was reported allows some reflection on the way in which such set-piece occasions developed an important place in the transmission and exchange of political ideas in late-Victorian Britain. Political tours

⁵ *Inverness Courier*, 17 Sep. 1885; *Inverness Advertiser*, 25 Sep. 1885.

⁶ *Inverness Courier*, 15 Sep. 1885.

⁷ University of Birmingham Library [UBL], Joseph Chamberlain Papers, JC5/16/108, Chamberlain to Collings, 20 Sep. 1885.

⁸ James G. Kellas, 'The Liberal party and the Scottish church disestablishment crisis', *English Historical Review* 79 (1964) 35; Alan Simon, 'Church disestablishment as a factor in the general election of 1885', *Historical Journal* 18 (1975) 797-800.

of this kind were becoming more frequent by the mid-1880s. The trend had begun with Gladstone's 'Midlothian campaigns' of 1879 and 1880 and speakers relied on the newspaper reporters, the telegraph system and the news agencies to ensure that their words reached a wide newspaper readership. This could be done in a remarkably quick time in 1885, all the facilities were in place: newspapers, relieved of various burdens of taxation, were cheap and diverse, with over 2000 titles in existence by the mid-1880s (four weeklies in Inverness alone); the telegraph system was pretty comprehensive in its geographical coverage by the 1850s and state-owned by the 1870s; and there was a well understood market and system of payment between the news agencies and the press for the words of politicians of standing. In the case of Chamberlain's meeting the local reporters had completed their work of writing out a verbatim account of the speech within three hours of the end of the meeting and only an hour later over 300,000 words, or 120 columns of a standard newspaper, had been despatched from the Inverness telegraph office.⁹ Nevertheless, politicians still had to make and sustain their reputations by frequent appearance before a live audience, hence the need for grand local occasions, such as the one under scrutiny here.¹⁰

The immediate context was the elongated general election campaign which was in full swing. Gladstone's Liberal administration, in which Chamberlain had been President of the Board of Trade, had left office in early June. An election could not be held immediately as new electoral registers had to be prepared to take account of the fact that the electorate had been considerably extended in 1885, this task could not be completed until the winter and the election was held over a period of about three weeks in November and December 1885. Chamberlain's principal appeal in this tour was to the new voters who would be exercising their franchise for the first time in the forthcoming election. As the *Inverness Courier* noted, although warning of the dangers of demagoguery and unrealistic expectations, 'the classes to whom the franchise is now entrusted have wants and wishes of their own to which Mr Chamberlain has been the first to give voice and emphasis.'¹¹ The event was not without its controversial elements, notably the debate over the decision to award the freedom of the burgh to Chamberlain, and latent suspicions about the choice of Liberal candidate for the upcoming election. This article will reflect on the importance of the occasion and offer an analysis of the contents of the

⁹ *Inverness Courier*, 19 Sep. 1885.

¹⁰ Joseph S. Meisel, *Public Speech and the Culture of Public Life in the Age of Gladstone* (New York 2001); Alfred Kinnear, 'The trade in great men's speeches', *Contemporary Review* 75 (1899) 439-44.

¹¹ *Inverness Courier*, 19 Sep. 1885.

speech itself. While Chamberlain's speaking tour in the autumn of 1885 has been extensively commented upon by his biographers, the Inverness speech has received comparatively little attention.¹²

The speaker

Joseph Chamberlain (1836–1914) was an unusual late-Victorian politician and his career can be briefly summed up with reference to four themes: industrialism, the municipal ideal, radicalism and imperialism.¹³ Chamberlain entered parliament for Birmingham in 1876, having been defeated at Sheffield in 1874, already well known for his business and political activities in that city. One of nine children of a London cordwainer, he was sent to Birmingham by his father in 1854 to look after his investment in the new process of the manufacture of wood screws. He immersed himself in every aspect of the business and it brought him wealth of sufficient extent to permit his retirement in 1874 to focus on politics. His life in Birmingham was not confined to business, however; increasingly he became aware of the social impact of his factory on the city and its effect on class relations. He developed a sustained interest in elementary education and he was central to the foundation of the National Education League in 1869. He served as Mayor of Birmingham in the mid-1870s and devoted his considerable energies to extending the activities of the municipality by taking over services such as gas and water and running them at a profit. He was also the driving force behind a vast slum-clearance operation. These activities put Birmingham in the forefront of the development of urban government in the late nineteenth century and gave Chamberlain an abiding belief in the utility of local political action.¹⁴ By the time he entered the Cabinet in 1880 Chamberlain was one of the very few businessmen in the highest echelons of political life, Gladstone's administration being heavily populated by aristocrats such as the duke of Argyll and the marquis of Hartington. Throughout his political career, despite rising to high office, he would always remain something of an outsider and perpetually laboured under the suspicion that he was not a gentleman. Along with his close associate Charles Dilke, he was clearly identified by the public, his colleagues and opponents as a radical, even destabilising, force in politics. In 1885–6 he was often

¹² See, for example, Peter T. Marsh, *Joseph Chamberlain: entrepreneur in politics* (New Haven and London 1994) 206; although note J. L. Garvin and J. Amery, *The Life of Joseph Chamberlain*, 6 vols (London 1932–69) ii, 68–70.

¹³ For those without the stamina for Marsh, *Chamberlain*, which runs to 725 pages, there is an excellent short summary by the same author in Peter T. Marsh, 'Chamberlain, Joseph (1836–1914)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford 2004) [www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/32350, accessed 20 Oct. 2005].

¹⁴ Marsh, *Chamberlain*, 77–10.

bracketed with Lord Randolph Churchill, the proponent of 'Tory Democracy', who was perceived, with good reason as it turned out, as an equally unstable force. More tangible relationships were with other Birmingham MPs like John Bright and Jesse Collings.¹⁵ In 1886 he left the Liberal party in opposition to Irish home rule. His unionism – in which he was joined by Hartington, whom he had derided in 1885 as 'Rip van Winkle' – was based on a fear that home rule for Ireland would weaken the empire. In 1895 he became Colonial Secretary and used his position to promote the idea of imperial unity. Having been at the heart of division in the Liberal party over Ireland in 1886 he had a similar effect on the Conservatives as he resigned from the cabinet in 1903 to promote a campaign for tariff reform. His political career was effectively ended by a debilitating stroke in 1906. Despite having begun political life as a radical Liberal Chamberlain founded a Conservative dynasty: two of his sons, Austen and Neville, were to lead the party, the latter serving as prime Minister from 1937 to 1940.

The Inverness speech was at the centre of his projection of his radical political identity. The tour, of which the Inverness speech was a part, had begun in Hull on 5 and 6 August where his meeting was modestly advertised with banners which hailed him as the 'coming prime Minister'.¹⁶ Further speeches were delivered at Warrington and Glasgow before he reached Inverness on 18 September. Chamberlain's biographer, J. L. Garvin, gave the impression that Chamberlain was speaking in favour of a carefully thought out 'Unauthorized programme' of radical policies which ran counter to the official policy of the Liberal party. There was a certain amount of evidence for this, not least in the form of a small red book published in the summer of 1885 and entitled *The Radical Programme*; it contained articles previously published in the *Fortnightly Review* and a preface by Chamberlain.¹⁷ Garvin describes it as 'his handbook' and identified seven 'principal propositions' of the "unauthorised programme": these were free education; extension of local government to the counties; 'Home-rule-all-round'; graduated taxation; land reform; disestablishment; and manhood suffrage and payment of MPs. Garvin concluded that these ideas were 'not merely inflammatory but incendiary'.¹⁸ Others have seen *The Radical Programme* as an attempt to lay out a scheme of practical radical policies which would appeal to middle class voters and provide a clear alternative to the socialist doctrines being propagated by H. M. Hyndman of the Social Democratic Federation and the American

¹⁵ Roland Quinault, 'John Bright and Joseph Chamberlain', *Historical Journal* 28 (1985) 623-46.

¹⁶ Denis Judd, *Radical Joe: A Life of Joseph Chamberlain* (London 1977) 122.

¹⁷ *The Times*, 15 Sep. 1885; *The Radical Programme* (London 1885).

¹⁸ Garvin, *Chamberlain* ii 56-7 75-7.

land reformer and advocate of the doctrine of the 'Single Tax', Henry George, a familiar figure in the Scottish highlands.¹⁹ Subsequent work has cast doubt on elements of Garvin's analysis: it has been argued that he exaggerated the differences between Chamberlain and the leadership of the party and that his 1885 speeches did not amount to a tight programme. The phrase 'unauthorised programme' was coined by G. J. Goschen, another future Liberal Unionist, at Glasgow in October 1885.²⁰ Nevertheless, on the issues which figured most prominently in the Glasgow and Inverness speeches – disestablishment, land reform and free education – Chamberlain was much less ambiguous than Gladstone, although towards the end of the Inverness speech he said that he 'had no pretension at all to lay down any complete or exhaustive Liberal programme.'²¹ That was Gladstone's prerogative and his programme, in the form of an address to his Midlothian constituents, had been published on the morning of Chamberlain's Inverness speech. In this address Gladstone touched, in his inimitable elliptical style, on the question of sectionalism within the Liberal party:

no section constitutes the Liberal party. Each section constitutes an element of the Liberal party; and it is by the mixture and composition of its elements, not by the unchecked dominance of any one among them, that its results have been, and will be, attained. I have found honourable cooperation with Liberals of all sections ... perfectly attainable in the past, and were I a younger man, I should hope that it might long continue in the future.²²

Liberal unity was not to prove possible in the long term, although in the event the fracture was caused not by the radicalism articulated by Chamberlain in 1885 but by Gladstone's espousal of the idea of Irish home rule, although this did put him and Chamberlain on opposite sides of the division.

Inverness politics

The Inverness district of burghs (which included the burghs of Inverness, Nairn, Forres and Fortrose) had been represented since 1874 by Charles Fraser Mackintosh, a well known figure in local politics and

¹⁹ D. A. Hamer, 'Introduction', in *The Radical Programme*, ed. D. A. Hamer (Brighton 1971) vii-xliv.

²⁰ C. H. D. Howard, 'Joseph Chamberlain and the "unauthorised programme"', *English Historical Review* 65 (1950) 477-91.

²¹ *The Radical Platform*, 53.

²² *Scotsman*, 18 Sep. 1885; see also editorial on 19 Sep. 1885.

the development of the town.²³ Since he had developed an interest in the conditions of the crofters he felt that it would be more appropriate to seek election to the Inverness-shire seat and, in murky circumstances with the burgh Liberal Association feeling ill-used, he made his excuses and left in early 1885.²⁴ In the election of 1885 the seat was contested by two Liberal candidates, Robert Bannatyne Finlay, a moderate figure from a legal background, and an altogether more radical candidate – W. S. B. MacLaren. Although the differences between them on issues such as the land question may have been obscured by the controversy over disestablishment, MacLaren was clearly identified as the more radical candidate. One local newspaper summed up the differences as being wider than disagreements over policy would indicate: ‘In the one case we have the honest, manly, outspoken, intelligent radical, in full sympathy with the advanced political aspirations of the people; in the other, the ambitious, able Whig lawyer-politician – supported by an incongruous combination of all the old Whigs and a united phalanx of all the Tories in the Burghs – a sufficiently significant fact by itself.’²⁵ Thus, not only in the presence of Chamberlain in Inverness do we have evidence of division in the Liberal party but also in the double Liberal candidature in the Inverness burghs seat. MacLaren was the son of the famous Edinburgh radical member, Duncan MacLaren – known as the ‘member for Scotland’ – and was, through his mother, the nephew of John Bright. There is interesting evidence in Chamberlain’s papers that the connection with Walter MacLaren was important in the setting up of the meeting; a letter to MacLaren prefaces a discussion of the highland land question and the contents of the Napier report with questions about the details of the arrangements for the Inverness meeting.²⁶ MacLaren was popular among the working men of Inverness, having been accorded the traditional gesture of having the horses unhitched from his carriage and being pulled into the town by workmen when he arrived in Inverness at the beginning of September 1885.²⁷ The Glasgow meeting which preceded the Inverness one was arranged with the encouragement of John Ferguson, leader of Glasgow radical Liberalism. Ferguson exhorted Chamberlain to come north:

²³ Ewen A. Cameron, ‘The construction of Union street, Inverness, 1863–5’, *Scottish Local History* no. 44 (Winter, 1998) 13–18; Ewen A. Cameron, ‘The political career of Charles Fraser Mackintosh, 1874–92’, *Transactions of the Gaelic Society of Inverness* 60 (1996–8) 17–55.

²⁴ Ewen A. Cameron, *The Life and Times of Charles Fraser Mackintosh, Crofter MP* (Aberdeen 2000) 144–9.

²⁵ *Scottish Highlander*, 18 Sep. 1885.

²⁶ UBL, JC L. Add 36, Chamberlain to W. S. B. MacLaren, 25 Apr. 1885.

²⁷ *Scottish Highlander*, 4 Sep. 1885.

You should come at once. If you wish for an invitation from some good organisation say the word and the 'No. Lanarkshire Liberal Association' will send you a warm one. The St Andrews Hall (like your town hall) will be filled to the door and the big Whigs will crowd round you to display how Liberal they are. This being an orthodox Gladstonian Association not a word can be said by any other Liberal Association. You can come again sometime and lecture to the Scottish Liberal Association which no longer has any power. 50,000 working men votes in Glasgow are now the power.²⁸

A further element in the contextual jigsaw of these speeches was the establishment, on 15 September 1885, of the National Liberal Federation of Scotland, a radical organisation designed as a counterweight to the more moderate Scottish Liberal Association.²⁹ With this in mind the nature of the platform party in Inverness and its reception on the night of the speech is interesting. Conspicuous by his absence – perhaps unsurprisingly given his jilting of the Burgh – was Fraser Mackintosh, currently campaigning in the Western Isles. There is some evidence, although it is circumstantial, that Fraser Mackintosh did have a hand in the invitation to Chamberlain to come to Inverness; Charles Cooper, the editor of the *Scotsman*, instinctively felt that the invitation to Chamberlain originated not only from MacLaren but also from Fraser Mackintosh.³⁰ Indeed, Cooper pressed Rosebery to go to Inverness and made the point that Chamberlain had to be directly countered and that only Rosebery's prestige was sufficient for the task.³¹ Conspicuous by their presence, however, was the MacLaren clan: Finlay and his wife were outnumbered by W. S. B. MacLaren and his wife, Duncan MacLaren and C. B. MacLaren, and his wife. The platform party was headed, as social etiquette dictated due to his social position, by the marquis of Stafford (eldest son of the duke of Sutherland); he could also be claimed as a radical given his espousal of the cause of the crofters during the recent part of his period as MP for Sutherland. Three other crofter candidates – Dr Clark (Caithness), Dr MacDonald (Ross-shire) and Angus Sutherland (Sutherland) – were also present, as were the sitting Liberal MPs for Caithness and Ross-shire and the candidate for Inverness-shire, Sir Kenneth Mackenzie of Gairloch. Further signals can also be detected by the make-up of a party

²⁸ UBL, JC8/6/3G/3, Chamberlain to John Ferguson, 30 Jun. 1885.

²⁹ Iain G.C. Hutchison, *A Political History of Scotland, 1832-1924: Parties, Elections and Issues* (Edinburgh 1986) 156.

³⁰ National Library of Scotland [NLS], Rosebery Papers, MS 10011, f. 107, Cooper to Rosebery, 24 Aug. 1885.

³¹ NLS, Rosebery Papers, MS 10011, ff. 98, 102, 104-5, 107, 109, 115-16, 118, 120, Cooper to Rosebery, 6 Jul., 7, 14, 24, 31 Aug., 8, 14, 17 Sep. 1885.

which accompanied Chamberlain and MacLaren for dinner prior to the meeting, this included Gavin Clark and Angus Sutherland as well as John Macleod of Gartymore, a close associate of Sutherland and his eventual successor as the MP for Sutherland.³² The *Inverness Courier* reported that Finlay's arrival was greeted by 'hearty and prolonged applause' while the MacLarens were welcomed by 'loud and continued cheers'.³³ Suspicion that something was meant by these seemingly insignificant elements of the arrangements is increased by a letter from 'Watchman' which was printed in the *Courier*; he inferred that the promoters of the meeting were the section of the Burgh Liberal Association in favour of MacLaren's candidature and he went on to allege:

...the views of Mr Chamberlain and Mr MacLaren about the Church, the land, and various other planks of the radical platform are closely similar; and the Inverness Burgh Liberal Association, in endeavouring to make capital out of Mr Chamberlain's recommendation of their favoured candidate, must also be held to identify themselves with Mr Chamberlain's most forward views upon these questions. Are those views such as any considerable number of the electors of these burghs, or of the electors of the Highlands in general, have ever on any occasion expressed any love for? Are the educative results of Mr Chamberlain's descent on the Highland Capital desired by the Inverness Burgh Liberal Association, such as the mass of the electors also desire? Unquestionably no.³⁴

'Watchman' proved to be accurate in his prediction as Finlay was returned for the Inverness Burghs in the election with 52.5 per cent of the votes cast.³⁵ A further controversy surrounding Chamberlain's visit turned partly on his political outlook but also on his religious background. Non-conformity could be added to the list of defining characteristics of Chamberlain's career. His background was Unitarian but his faith had been undermined by the personal tragedy of the death of both his first and second wives in childbirth; although this was known to close contemporaries such as Charles Dilke and John Morley (a rationalist), it was not widely known to the public and Chamberlain was seen as the Non-conformist Liberal *par excellence*. This fact coloured many of the responses to his political ideas but it was also the subject of comment in Inverness prior to the meeting. Before his arrival

³² *Scottish Highlander*, 25 Sep. 1885.

³³ *Inverness Courier*, 19 Sep. 1885.

³⁴ *Inverness Courier*, 15 Sep. 1885.

³⁵ *British Parliamentary Election Results, 1885–1918*, ed. F. W. S. Craig (London 1974) 512.

the Town Council debated the proposal to offer the freedom of the Burgh to their distinguished visitor. While this was agreed, and given effect to on 19 September, dissenting voices were raised. Two points exercised the minority of councillors who were uneasy at the prospect of honouring Chamberlain in this way: the first was they had established a poor precedent in not offering the same honour to Sir Stafford Northcote (by 1885 Lord Iddesleigh) when he visited Inverness in 1882; the second point was made by Bailie Mackay, who objected to Chamberlain because he did not think they should 'confer the honour on one who was antichrist ... or at least a Unitarian.'³⁶ This point was taken up by Duncan Campbell, editor of the *Northern Chronicle*, the Conservative newspaper in Inverness, and a committed opponent of disestablishment. Campbell suggested that Unitarianism 'is Deism clinging feebly to Christian morals and forms of worship. It is a great deal better than Atheism but politically they are allies.'³⁷ Campbell, who denigrated the Town Council as a clique of advanced Liberals, regarded the question of the freedom of the burgh as 'foregone conclusion', but he sought to damn Chamberlain's political achievements with faint praise:

Mr Chamberlain may be a rising statesman but he has not got beyond the mere demagogue stage, and his services to the State during his five years' tenure of office were not conspicuous for success in his own Department...Mr Chamberlain wants to get up a passionate party fervour and he is not at all scrupulous as to the means.³⁸

Even before he stood up to speak, then, it can be seen that Joseph Chamberlain had caused quite a political stir in Inverness.

*The speech*³⁹

The bulk of Chamberlain's speech was devoted to the question of the crofters: a hagiographer claimed that the 'hearts of the crofters were captured ... by a candid and sympathetic address delivered at Inverness ... one of the most stirring addresses that has been voiced by the statesman.' *The Times*, on the other hand damned it with faint praise, remarking that it was 'of the same general complexion as his recent speeches at other places, with the addition only of a strong infusion of

³⁶ *Inverness Courier*, 15 Sep. 1885.

³⁷ *Northern Chronicle*, 23 Sep. 1885.

³⁸ *Northern Chronicle*, 16 Sep. 1885.

³⁹ A text of the speech was published under the title of 'The crofters' in *Speeches of the Right Hon. Joseph Chamberlain MP, With a Sketch of his Life*, ed. H.W. Lucy (London 1885) 206-16, and in the local newspapers; a fuller version, however, appears in *The Radical Platform* and that is the version which will be referred to in this article.

local colouring.⁴⁰ His interest in the crofters was not solely driven by the highland audience with which he was faced in Inverness; he had long been interested in the plight of the agricultural labourers and with Jesse Collings he put forward the idea of assisting them through the creation of smallholdings: 'three acres and a cow' was their slogan.⁴¹ He began with a conventional point, the sterling imperial services of highlanders, but noted that this had met with 'scant requital at the hands of those who have represented her authority and her power'; he contrasted this historic position with the fact that in recent times the appeal of the highlander had been heard and that legislation was in prospect.⁴² The administration of which Chamberlain had been a member had attempted to pass a bill which would have given security of tenure to the crofters.⁴³ He proceeded to give a fairly standard radical critique of private landownership in the highlands, denying that such a concept was applicable to much of the history of the region prior to 1886:

The land belonged, in common possession, to the chief of the clan, or perhaps it would be more correct to say that the chief held it in trust for his clan. At all events there was no claim to, absolute and unrestricted ownership. Security of tenure was inherent in the customs of the people, even if it did not receive the sanction of the law, and the arbitrary claim to absolute possession and disposition of the soil had one sprung up within the last hundred and fifty years. But in the course of that time landlordism has taken the place of the old patriarchal relations, and the rights and claims of private ownership have been enforced with a rigour for which there is no parallel in the annals of the country.⁴⁴

This was a point which attracted the attention of the duke of Argyll in one of his many letters to *The Times*. Argyll could be said to have been to have been one of the most rigorous in his enforcement of the 'rights and claims of private ownership', both in his actions as a landowner and as an author who constructed an intellectual defence of private landownership. Indeed, he had sacrificed his political career on the point, resigning from Gladstone's cabinet in 1881 in opposition to

⁴⁰ Louis Creswicke, *The Life of the Right Honourable Joseph Chamberlain*, 4 vols (London 1904) i, 199.

⁴¹ Roland Quinault, 'Joseph Chamberlain: A Reassessment', in *Later Victorian Britain, 1867–1900*, ed. T. R. Gourvish & Alan O'Day (Basingstoke 1988) 77.

⁴² *The Radical Platform*, 44–5; *The Times*, 19 Sep. 1885.

⁴³ Ewen A. Cameron, *Land for the People? The British Government and the Scottish Highlands, c.1880–1925* (East Linton 1996) 34–5.

⁴⁴ *The Radical Platform*, 45.

the Irish land act of that year. Argyll called Chamberlain's assertions 'wild' and 'altogether erroneous' noting that he and many other landed proprietors in Scotland possessed documentary evidence showing that 'all over the highlands the fullest ownership of land had been established ever since the earliest times of written records.'⁴⁵ The *Courier* also doubted that his 'historical sketch ... would not bear impartial examination.'⁴⁶ The point of this debate is vital to an understanding of the nature of the land question in late-Victorian Britain. If radicals could successfully assert that landownership was a fiction based on robbery and that the income from its possession was not 'earned' in the same way as industrial or commercial investments (such as were the basis of Chamberlain's own wealth), then the intervention of the state to secure the rights of tenants would not be a true infringement of the rights of property such as would horrify most Liberals. When the crofters' act was eventually passed in 1886 it was justified by Gladstone in terms of righting the wrongs of highland history, rather than denying the existence of private property rights in land. Chamberlain went on to review the history of the clearances in the next section of his speech, for which he had prepared by reading the accounts of those who had travelled in the region in the eighteenth century, notably Pennant's *Voyages to the Hebrides* of 1772.⁴⁷

Thousands of industrious, hard-working, God-fearing people were driven from the lands which had belonged to their ancestors, and which for generations they had cultivated. Their houses were unroofed and destroyed; they were turned out homeless and forlorn, exposed to the inclemency of the winter season, left to perish on the hill-side or to swell the full flood of misery and destitution in the cities to which they were driven for refuge. In some cases the cruel kindness of their landlords provided the means of emigration. In some cases they were actually driven abroad. They suffered greatly in foreign countries, being unprovided with the means of sustaining themselves until they could earn a livelihood, but the descendants of those who survived have contributed in no mean way to the prosperity of the countries in which they finally settled.⁴⁸

The reaction of the *Scotsman* to this portion of the speech condemned Chamberlain for taking an overly optimistic view of highland society prior to the clearances: 'for the most part the removal

⁴⁵ *The Times*, 29 Sep. 1885; reprinted in the *Scotsman*, 30 Sep. 1885.

⁴⁶ *Inverness Courier*, 19 Sep. 1885.

⁴⁷ UBL, JC6/5/12, 'Notebook on Scottish land question and 1885 campaign'.

⁴⁸ *The Radical Platform*, 46.

of the people from the glens to the sea-shore was well-intentioned, and was actually beneficial. It is one of the fictions of those who are continually recurring to the clearances, that the people in the glens were happy and prosperous. They never were.⁴⁹ Chamberlain made an important point when he noted that the land question and the injuriousness of untrammelled rights in private property was not confined to rural society. He reminded his audience that as well as the Napier commission, which had examined the grievances of the crofters, there was another royal commission which had examined the housing of the working-classes and had revealed desperate conditions; such, he argued, 'were the practical results of a system which postpones the good of the community to the interests of individuals, which loses sight altogether of the obligations of property in servile adulation of its rights.'⁵⁰ Chamberlain began to move to his suggested solution to the land question, a solution which was to be found in a 'universal system of popular representative local government'.⁵¹ His proposal was that local authorities should have the right to compulsorily purchase land for extension of small holdings, crofts and pasture lands. Tenants would have security of tenure, fair rent, compensation for improvements, and the right of free sale.⁵² This was an interesting potential solution but it would have required the establishment, as Chamberlain noted at the outset, of effective local government in the Scottish counties; the current arrangements were rudimentary and dominated by landowners, who met as 'Commissioners of Supply', and since the revenue for services was based on local property taxes, of which they paid the bulk, they had a powerful incentive to minimise activity and expenditure. The editorial in the *Northern Chronicle* claimed to have found an inconsistency in Chamberlain's speech, 'for while actually proposing a scheme for investing crofters and town-dwellers with private property in land, he denounces private property in land as a great evil.'⁵³ Chamberlain was a little vague on whether local authorities or the crofters themselves should be the owners of the land, perhaps the former, but he did not advocate the end of private property in land. This was not mere timidity, but a definite attempt to distance himself from those who did adopt such a position. In the letter to Walter MacLaren, quoted above, Chamberlain commented that he was not impressed by the pamphlets of the Scottish Land Restoration League.⁵⁴ This was an organisation of urban radicals who advocated the doctrines of Henry

⁴⁹ *Scotsman*, 21 Sep. 1885.

⁵⁰ *The Radical Platform*, 47.

⁵¹ *The Radical Platform*, 48.

⁵² *The Radical Platform*, 48-50.

⁵³ *Northern Chronicle*, 23 Sep. 1885.

⁵⁴ UBL, JC L. Add 36, Chamberlain to W.S.B. MacLaren, 25 Apr. 1885.

George who suggested that through a 'single tax' private landownership could be effectively abolished and resources released for social reform. The *Chronicle* suggested that he was 'evidently separating himself from the Henry George set' and in his speech he hinted at this when he remarked, 'I know that more drastic measures have been laid before you by other persons' but he did not believe they were realistic.⁵⁵ Although Chamberlain was sometimes condemned as 'socialistic', his ideas on the land question demonstrate that he wished to distance himself in an explicit manner from such a position. Indeed, he made this point quite clearly in the conclusion to his Inverness speech:

My proposals have been, I think, sufficiently moderate, yet in some quarters they have been denounced as excessive and revolutionary. They have been described, by those who think the phrase a sufficient term, as 'socialistic.' But these persons have forgotten to tell you that they are also Christian. I believe that the democratic changes which have recently taken effect will bring about a change in the character of our policy; that the community will recognise more fully than it has done in the past its obligations to its weaker and less fortunate members, and that it will do something to aid the oppressed and the down-trodden, to promote the contentment and the welfare of the whole population, and to secure in this way the stability of our institutions.⁵⁶

Although the *Chronicle* was suspicious of the way in which Chamberlain was 'assuming the airs of a man of remarkable moderation and of most just intention', there was a consistency and a logic to his position, as was recognised by the *Courier* which was more impressed with his moderation.⁵⁷ More radical newspapers, such as the *Scottish Highlander*, expressing disappointment with Chamberlain's ideas on the land question, used the praise of the *Courier* as evidence of Chamberlain's failure to suggest a realistic remedy for the grievances of the highland crofters.⁵⁸ As we have seen he had found his political feet in the arena of local politics and had a tendency to see the solution to multifarious problems – even the vexed question of Ireland, with which he proposed to deal by the establishment of something called a 'Central Board'⁵⁹ – in the amplification of local governmental structures. Having been seen as a destabilising force Chamberlain was

⁵⁵ *Northern Chronicle*, 23 Sep. 1885; *The Radical Platform*, 51.

⁵⁶ *The Radical Platform*, 54.

⁵⁷ *Northern Chronicle*, 23 Sep. 1885; *Inverness Courier*, 19 Sep. 1885.

⁵⁸ *Scottish Highlander*, 25 Sep. 1885.

⁵⁹ Marsh, *Chamberlain*, 192-7; C. H. D. Howard, 'Joseph Chamberlain and the "Irish central board" scheme, 1884-5', *Irish Historical Studies* 8 (1953) 237-63.

perhaps aware of the need to strive to present radical ideas with a conservative foundation.

Before reaching this peroration, however, Chamberlain touched on two final points. The first was a component of the land question, perhaps even the most vivid and controversial of its highland aspects: the question of deer forests. Nothing symbolised the injustice of the distribution of land in the north of Scotland as contiguity of congestion in crofting townships and the extensive acreages devoted to an indulgence of the elite, and the land reform movement consistently made the most of this. Chamberlain made two suggestions, both of which would have been familiar to his audience: he demanded the 'restitution to agricultural uses' of deer forest land below 1000 feet; and he argued that they should be 'subjected to special taxation intended to discourage them.'⁶⁰ This point was controversial in that forests were rated at their agricultural value which was much less than their sporting value; this was, in effect, an incentive for their extension. This sat uneasily alongside the poverty of local government in the highlands as the low value of land meant that the base of taxation was insufficient to raise revenue sufficient for proper services.

The final theme of Chamberlain's speech was one of his favourites and a staple of radical politics: the demand for free education.⁶¹ Since compulsory education had been introduced in England and Wales in 1870 and in Scotland two years later, many radicals pointed to the inconsistency of continuing to demand fees for schooling. Chamberlain admitted to Collings that all he wanted to do was 'to get the principle of Free Education established, and I don't want to dwell on the method.'⁶² Once again his thoughts were dressed in conservative clothes by stressing the wide social benefits of mass education.

Crime in the country, and especially juvenile crime, has been diminished. Habits of thrift and temperance have been encouraged; the character, tastes, and pursuits of the whole people have been raised. But there are still portions of the population, especially the poorer portions, who are still outside the schools, and to whom our system has as yet produced no good result. I believe that this is largely due to the pressure of the fees – largely due to the exaction of taxation from those portions of the population that are least able to bear it.⁶³

⁶⁰ *The Radical Platform*, 51.

⁶¹ Alan Simon, 'Joseph Chamberlain and free education in the election of 1885', *History of Education* 2 (1973) 56-78.

⁶² UBL, JC5/16/109, Chamberlain to Collings, 27 Sep. 1885.

⁶³ *The Radical Platform*, 52; in one edited collection of Chamberlain's speeches the section on free education is the only portion of the Inverness speech which is printed, *Mr Chamberlain's Speeches*, ed. Charles W. Boyd, 2 vols (London 1914) i, 207-11.

Chamberlain declared that he could not rest until he saw 'this abominable and cruel tax abolished, and until every national school is free throughout the breadth and length of the land.' Chamberlain argued that the shortfall in resources should be made up, not from the rates, but from the 'vast endowments which are now appropriated to the service of a single sect'.⁶⁴ This sting in the tail of the speech was a tilt at two particular windmills: the wealth of the national churches, which Chamberlain wished to see disestablished and disendowed; and the historical endowments for educational purposes currently being adapted for middle class secondary education, but originally designed for the education of the poor. This cause was a favourite of Duncan MacLaren in his Edinburgh stamping ground where the heart of the controversy lay.⁶⁵

Conclusion

Despite his denials of adumbration of a detailed and consistent political programme there seems little doubt that Chamberlain's objective in his tour of 1885 was to adapt Liberal rhetoric for the new political conditions. Franchise reforms and redistribution of seats in 1885 had changed the political landscape and the concerns of these new voters had to be addressed, Chamberlain felt that he was ideally equipped for such a task. He was speaking not only to the burghers of Inverness, gathered under gaslight and calico in their wooden pavilion, but also the newly enfranchised crofters in the highland county seats and their counterparts throughout Britain. Unfortunately, historians have generally concluded that the result of his oratory was damaging to the Liberal cause. At least one of Chamberlain's opponents in the party felt that he had overextended himself in the Scottish campaign. W. S. Holmes Ivory, a leading Liberal and Edinburgh lawyer was 'confident that his speech ... will do more harm than good' and that 'the more he identifies himself with one section of the party the more impossible he makes it for the whole party to unite under him at any time in the future.'⁶⁶ The 1885 election is difficult to interpret as the Irish community in Britain had been encouraged to vote for the Conservatives, who at that time seemed to offer a better prospect of home rule. Although Chamberlain's rhetoric about small holdings extension, encapsulated in the slogan 'three acres and a cow', played

⁶⁴ *The Radical Platform*, 53.

⁶⁵ Robert. D. Anderson, *Education and Opportunity in Victorian Scotland* (Oxford 1983) 182.

⁶⁶ NLS, Rosebery Papers, MS 10037, f. 145, Holmes Ivory to Rosebery, 21 Sep. 1886.

well in rural seats, the Conservatives performed well in urban constituencies.⁶⁷

The Scottish tour, and the Inverness meeting in particular, came at an interesting moment in the history of Liberalism. Many observers detected a growing tension within the party over a range of issues, including the land question, disestablishment, and free education, during the election campaign in 1885. One leading Whig landowner, the earl of Fife, after expressing his disgust at the 'miserable rubbish with which Birmingham has deluged the whole of the country during the autumn' felt that the ideological divisions in the party were such that he was 'convinced that the only way to eradicate these new Socialistic doctrines from the Liberal creed is to seek in a few years of calm opposition an opportunity for serious reflection'.⁶⁸ The publication of Gladstone's Midlothian address and Chamberlain's Inverness speech could be said to exemplify the different positions in a more restrained fashion, although each denied the existence of rival programmes. Indeed, on the land question, the principal theme of Chamberlain's Inverness speech, Gladstone's address was characteristically vague and general.⁶⁹ Nevertheless, in another sense Chamberlain's speech came at a moment of optimism for Liberalism, especially so in the north of Scotland. The crofters had been enfranchised and were waiting to cast their votes for a series of crofter MPs; their grievances had been debated in parliament and they could expect legislation on the question in the event of the election of a Liberal government, perhaps even in the event of a Conservative government. The speech came at a moment of electoral expectancy for the party, a feeling that was dashed by the results of the election – a hung parliament with the Irish nationalists holding the balance of power. Above all it came prior to the extraordinary rupture in the party occasioned by Gladstone's espousal of Irish home rule. This rupture made earlier differences on issues of churches and schools seem tame by comparison, put Chamberlain and Gladstone on opposite sides of a new divide in politics and divided the crofters' movement. The effects of this ensured that when Chamberlain returned to the Highlands in 1887,⁷⁰ in the company of the faithful Collings, he did so under a

⁶⁷ Richard Jay, *Joseph Chamberlain: A Political Study* (Oxford 1981) 119-20; Judd, *Radical Joe*, 131; Marsh, *Chamberlain*, 212-13.

⁶⁸ National Archives of Scotland, Fetteresso MSS, GD105/365/5, Fife to R.W. Duff, 30 Nov. 1885.

⁶⁹ *Scotsman*, 18 Sep. 1885.

⁷⁰ Andrew G. Newby, 'Shoulder to shoulder? Scottish and Irish land reformers in the highlands of Scotland, 1879-1890', unpublished PhD thesis (University of Edinburgh 2001) 249-56.

Unionist banner and the kind of enthusiasm which he engendered in Inverness in 1885 was difficult to rekindle: a moment had passed.

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